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OtagoNet: A New Zealand
approach to virtual
schooling

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General Context

- National curriculum, school-based management
- Compulsory schooling 6-16
- 4 x 10 week terms (calendar year) (apart from this year)

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Context for this research

- Call for schools to cater for students with diverse needs (Alton-Lee, 2003)
- New Zealand has a sparse population, and rural populations are declining
- Schools, particularly small, rural schools, have insufficient specialised teachers to provide wide range of subjects

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OtagoNet solution

- Utilise the specialist teachers throughout the region and a combination of videoconferencing and other mechanisms to teach each other's students
- One hour videoconference per week, supplemented by other tools
 - Textbooks, workbooks, online tools
 - Classes start on the hour, and are prioritised over other classes
 - Have face-to-face day at start of year

The OtagoNet model

As one principal explained, this approach means they can

deliver a whole range of courses much more effectively than we could before. I think our students will benefit [from the] daily contact through email and fax, telephone with their tutor. They will feel more identified with their tutor than they do currently...if they have face to face with that person, once a week, then it just adds a personal touch there and if we can bring them together as a group collectively, then we can get a class feeling...

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The OtagoNet model

- 2001 OtagoNet planned
- 2002 OtagoNet first started offering classes
 - 2002: 11 classes to 60 students
 - 2011: 26 classes to 340 students
- 2011: 14 clusters throughout New Zealand
 - Over 200 schools and other organisations

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The OtagoNet model

- Staffed by:
 - Project Leader
 - eDean
 - eLibrarian
 - Executive officer
 - eTeachers
 - School coordinators
- Reciprocal model
- eHui

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Beyond videoconferencing

- In addition to OtagoNet videoconference classes, students now participate in other forms of learning:
 - Videoconferencing via other providers
 - Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu - The Correspondence School
 - Courses through tertiary providers
 - Workbased learning
- In 2011, between 26% and 90% of senior secondary students participated in at least one form of non-traditional learning alongside their face to face classes

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Research

- OtagoNet evaluation (2001 – 2004) (CTO):
 - Longitudinal evaluation of this new collaborative and innovative approach to teaching and learning
- Blended learning part 1:
 - Small scale mixed method study exploring students' experiences
- Blended learning part 2 (2010) (TLRI):
 - Built on previous study; involved students and teachers from 10 schools in a mixed method study
- Blended learning part 3 (2012) (UoO):
 - Building on what we know so far: Increasing focus on supporting students

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Initial research

- This model was generally effective
 - Better than paper-based correspondence
 - “It was a lot better because you actually had a teacher once a week who could help you plus resource booklets”
 - Not always as good as face-to-face
 - “It was a lot different to the school setting because you’ve only got your teachers there at certain times but at school you can go to your teacher whenever”
 - Issue was amount and timing of interaction

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Initial research: Conclusion

- While there were some issues, student and teachers agreed this was better than other options available at the time

“Learning like this has been awesome. I hope I have as much fun this year as I did last year”

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Teacher research: Achievement

- Small numbers and varied subjects make achievement comparisons difficult

Ken Pullar (eTeacher and current Project Leader)

- compared performance in OtagoNet classes to that of their face-to-face classes
- overall, students performed as well or better

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Shift in focus

- Students now involved in taking multiple courses in multiple formats from multiple providers
- How are they experiencing school?
- Are they being supported effectively?
- Are all students able to take, and succeeding at, relevant and appropriate courses?

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How are they experiencing school?

- Students involved in wide range of classes
 - traditional school-based classes,
 - school-based non-traditional forms of learning
 - paper-based correspondence
 - videoconferencing-based classes
 - work-based programmes
 - study offered by tertiary providers
- Students did not differentiate classes based on format
 - classified by common activities rather than provider or medium
 - it appeared multiple formats was simply “what was done”

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Students' perspectives:

- I find [my blended learning class] easier because you are working at your own pace ... because I don't have a proper teacher with me.
- It is just hard to learn when you are not in class and I am so used to learning with all these people around you doing the same thing, but in the other one it is just like it is basically only you doing it. So it is hard.
- Because the teacher isn't there I find that I either have to work it out for myself or sort of find a way to get what I want and I guess that sorts of helps me with other classes because I know that I can usually try and find a way to get what I want.

Students' perspectives:

- I think that . . . you academically . . . learn in a different way. Like it is different and makes you more independent, and makes you think outside the box, and you really need to think about what you are going to do
- Probably taught me to be a more independent learner rather than just sit there and have the teacher spoonfeed us
- I enjoy it, it gives me a bit of independence and . . . it allows me to manage my own time . . . it probably set me up really good for university because it is a lot more independent

Are they being supported effectively?

- The amount, type and effectiveness of support varied widely between schools
 - This appeared to be a critical factor in terms of students' experiences

Lack of resources, the fact that we are not supervised most of the times and I cant say that I don't do it but [other students] just pretty much run wild and talk and listen to music and they don't really do anything

The computer system . . . Flash drives . . . I would love to be able to plug one of those in, and put my assignment on it, and take it home and finish it off, and bring it back and print it off. But we can't do that because we have "insufficient privileges". And like websites they have got heaps of them blocked

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Are all students able to take these classes?

- Students classified as
 - Traditional
 - Online
- No gender differences
- No differences in perceived independence
- When asked about decision to take classes, only 10% said they mostly or always considered the format of the class

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Conclusions

- For these students, school involves taking classes in multiple formats from multiple providers
- The levels and kinds of support provided appear critical, and further work needs to be done identifying what is critical and where improvements need to be made
- It appears that all students are able to take, and succeed at, relevant and appropriate courses – if they receive appropriate levels of support

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Questions?

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